

Local Voice in Decision-Making at the School System Level Across Canada:

A Report Prepared for the Canadian School Boards Association

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Executive Summary

This inquiry was commissioned by the Canadian School Boards Association. The Association was prompted to do so because of trustee concerns around the loss of involvement of the general public—or as many of our respondents termed it, local voice—in decision-making for publicly funded K–12 education in parts of Canada.

This inquiry is based on a multicase study focused on provincially and territorially funded school system governance in six jurisdictions that have different decision-making processes and structures: British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Québec, Nova Scotia, and the Northwest Territories. Between September 2021 and March 2023, the research team explored the participation and perceived impact of “local voice” in system-level decision-making in Canadian jurisdictions that have, or had, democratically elected school boards.

This report is organized into four sections that mirror the study objectives. Section 1 describes the overall methodology and case study approach, including the data collection and analysis procedures. The second section presents the case study findings by jurisdiction: British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Québec, Nova Scotia, and the Northwest Territories. Each subsection begins by describing the structure and processes of each jurisdiction in detail. This detail is included because there is such a wide level of variation between each jurisdiction—no two jurisdictions are the same. The third section provides a multicase analysis and reports the themes related to democratic voice in system-level decision-making. Lastly, the fourth section includes a list of recommendations for the Canadian School Boards Association.

All six sites were analyzed to discern how democratic voice is supported in the different systems. Our inquiry found that the public seems to be increasingly less involved in system-level decision-making, either by their choice or because of procedural changes that restrict opportunities for them to exercise their democratic voice. Overall, it was concluded that the removal of democratically elected boards of trustees impedes local democratic voice. The study found the greatest loss of democratic voice was in Anglophone Nova Scotia and Francophone Québec, where democratically elected boards of trustees have been replaced. This claim was based on:

- ◆ Less public engagement in education,
- ◆ Less transparency in decision-making processes,
- ◆ Less accountability of the education system to the public that it serves,
- ◆ Less representation in decision-making, and
- ◆ Less perceived freedom to express opposing views, both publicly and privately.

In jurisdictions that retain boards of trustees, reductions in democratic participation were also observed.

Participants recognized that there are issues with public engagement within non-traditional school board systems that do not have the basic infrastructure of democratic boards of trustees. The challenges associated with these new structures become barriers that obstruct democratic engagement. Further, the refusal of some to participate in the study for fear of personal or professional risk was deeply troubling. In a democratic society, no member of the public should express fear when contemplating participating in a study conducted by a third party with no formal or professional relationships with any of the study sites, and that had several checks and balances in place for both autonomy and confidentiality. Without freedom of expression, democracy cannot function effectively.

In total, 24 recommendations are presented to the Canadian School Boards Association under the following areas:

- ◆ Create a public awareness campaign,
- ◆ Encourage the auditing of citizenship and social studies curricula,
- ◆ Enhance accessibility of engagement practices,
- ◆ Foster partnership and networks,
- ◆ Increase Indigenous involvement,
- ◆ Increase immigrant and new Canadian involvement,
- ◆ Increase targeted parent involvement,
- ◆ Consider ways to increase student and youth involvement,
- ◆ Encourage democratically elected boards to implement clear strategic plan,
- ◆ Expand trustee professional development,
- ◆ Revisit elected school board structure and processes, and

- ◆ Convert existing communication strategies to a knowledge mobilization (KMb) approach.

Our research team offers these recommendations with an acknowledgement of the challenges associated with implementing broad, systemic change across these diverse jurisdictions. Some of these recommendations require additional resources, such as professional development or educational materials. Other recommendations go beyond providing resources: reaffirming the position of the CSBA as a facilitator to support its members in promoting institutional cultures within each province to influence whose voices are heard in public education.

In each of these cases, the CSBA may be required to take on a different supporting role for its members: as mediator, educator, advocate, or otherwise. It should also be noted that these recommendations are interrelated and meant to build from and support each other in large-scale education system change that is meaningful, long term, and approached simultaneously from different entry points (Campbell, 2021; Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2015; Fullan, 2010). The 24 recommendations are:

- ◆ **Recommendation 1:** Plan a Public Awareness Campaign
- ◆ **Recommendation 2:** Initiate a Public Campaign That Clarifies the Difference Between Governance and Operations
- ◆ **Recommendation 3:** Audit Current K–12 Civic and Citizen Education Curricula Learning Outcomes
- ◆ **Recommendation 4:** Work with Provincial and Territorial Governments to Modify and Update K–12 Citizenship and Social Studies Curricula
- ◆ **Recommendation 5:** Increase Clarity of Participation Processes
- ◆ **Recommendation 6:** Implement Linguistically Diverse Communication Strategies
- ◆ **Recommendation 7:** Conduct Accessibility Audits Across Jurisdictions
- ◆ **Recommendation 8:** Expand and Build Partnerships and Networks
- ◆ **Recommendation 9:** Investigate Ways to Increase Indigenous Involvement
- ◆ **Recommendation 10:** Partner with Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) to Advocate for Voter Eligibility
- ◆ **Recommendation 11:** Implement a Newcomer and Refugee Engagement Strategy

- ◆ **Recommendation 12:** Increase Parent Participation from Underrepresented Populations
- ◆ **Recommendation 13:** Encourage the Use of School Parent Councils
- ◆ **Recommendation 14:** Encourage and Support Paths for Parental Involvement Beyond the School Sites to Include System-Level Decision-Making
- ◆ **Recommendation 15:** Investigate Ways to Increase Student and Youth Involvement in System-Level Decision-Making
- ◆ **Recommendation 16:** Encourage Boards to Implement a Clear Strategic Plan
- ◆ **Recommendation 17:** Implement Strategic Onboarding Plans
- ◆ **Recommendation 18:** Increase Ongoing Professional Development
- ◆ **Recommendation 19:** Encourage Succession Planning
- ◆ **Recommendation 20:** Review Requirements for Those in Decision-Making Roles for Public Education
- ◆ **Recommendation 21:** Advocate for Limits on Number of Trustee or Commissioner Terms
- ◆ **Recommendation 22:** Create Alternative Engagement Processes
- ◆ **Recommendation 23:** Evaluate the CSBA's Communication Processes and Consider Including a Knowledge Mobilization (KMb) Approach
- ◆ **Recommendation 24:** Invest in Incorporating Effective Information Communication Technology

School governance systems today can learn from the challenges that may have played a part in the growing movement to remove power and authority from boards of trustees and school boards. For a new and changing Canadian future, policymakers need to find new ways to support a system that fosters democratic participation in public education.